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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 TEL AVIV 001742

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SUBJECT: HAMAS CHARGES USG CULPABILITY IN YASIN KILLING;
HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS MARCH IN GAZA PROCESSION

Classified By: Pol/C Norm Olsen, per 1.4(b) and (d).

THIS IS A JOINT MESSAGE FROM EMBASSY TEL AVIV AND CONGEN
JERUSALEM.

11. (S/NF) Summary: Hamas leaders have responded to the IAF's assassination of Hamas leader Shaykh Ahmad Yasin March 22 by vowing retaliation against Israel and blaming the USG, saying "The Zionists did not take such a step without the approval of the terrorist U.S. Administration. Therefore, it should bear responsibility for this crime." In Gaza City, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians marched in a funeral procession over four kilometers long. In addition to Yasin, two bodyguards and four other Hamas members were also killed, and Yasin's two sons and 17 others were wounded in the IAF missile attack. A senior IDF source told A/DATT that the IDF had evidence that Yasin was behind the decisions to escalate the number of attacks against Israel, including those targeting infrastructure, and to use women as suicide bombers, with the ultimate goal of creating the image that Hamas had pushed the IDF out of Gaza once Israel executes a unilateral withdrawal. In clashes with the IDF in the West Bank and elsewhere in the Gaza Strip, three Palestinians were killed and a total of 29 were injured. End Summary.

12. (SBU) The IDF succeeded in killing Hamas spiritual leader Shaykh Ahmad Yasin in the early hours of March 22, as Yasin was leaving morning prayers at a mosque in the Zeitoun area of Gaza City. According to IDF sources, IAF helicopters fired at least three missiles at Yasin's vehicle at 0510 hours March 22, killing Yasin, two bodyguards, and four other Hamas members (Note: UNRWA and Israeli media claimed that the four were passersby. End note.). Yasin's two sons, along with 17 others, were wounded; Israeli media claimed that one of Yasin's sons died subsequently of his injuries. According to GOI sources, the attack was planned after two Palestinians from Gaza carried out the March 14 suicide attack in the port of Ashdod that killed ten Israelis and wounded 20. Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz had also told the Israeli cabinet March 21 that the IDF had developed plans to "severely weaken" Hamas ahead of an Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

13. (S/NF) A senior IDF source told A/DATT March 22 that the IDF had evidence that Yasin was directly responsible for ordering the recent increase in attacks in Gaza and in Israel, including those targeting infrastructure, as well as the use of women as suicide bombers, with the ultimate goal of taking credit for pushing the IDF out of Gaza. The IDF source said the IDF had acted against Yasin in order to stop the escalation, prevent Hamas from developing an image as successfully forcing Israel out of Gaza, and to ensure that Hamas would not become the preeminent power in Gaza after Israel withdraws.

14. (SBU) Following the attack, the IDF completely closed the Gaza Strip and closed traffic through the main internal checkpoints in the middle of the Strip. In Gaza City, at 1000 hours an estimated 40,000 people were waiting outside the al-Shifa hospital to escort Yasin's body to the funeral, and flags from all Palestinian organizations were reportedly in evidence. By 1300, the crowd in Gaza City had swelled to an estimated several hundred thousand and eyewitnesses said the procession stretched over four kilometers down the four-lane Omar al-Mukhtar street, from Palestine Square to al-Nasser Street. One contact noted the absence of any PA security officials on the streets in Gaza City, ostensibly to avoid any possible confrontations with mourners or Hamas militants. PA security officers did, however, join the funeral procession as an honor guard.

15. (SBU) Immediately following the attack, Hamas official Ismail Haniyah said that "Sharon has opened the gates of Hell, and nothing will stop us from cutting off his (Sharon's) head." When asked in an interview with al-Jazeera whether a response to Yasin's killing was imminent, Abd al-Aziz Rantisi responded that the "Izzadin al-Qassam Brigades (militant wing of Hamas) will decide," but that Hamas action was not merely a response, but the "beginning of the battle." In Gaza, one militant announced that "a new Intifada begins today."

PA Statements Denounce Attack, Call for Unity

16. (SBU) There has been an immense outpouring of grief and anger throughout the territories. In the official PA statement, PA Chairman Yasir Arafat condemned the assassination and called on Palestinians to close ranks and show strength and unity. Arafat ordered three days of national mourning in the West Bank and Gaza in honor of Yasin. PA Prime Minister Ahmad Quraya, echoed the thoughts, adding that the assassination would &escalate the operations, which) with regret) Israel plans for.8 Quraya, appealed to the Quartet and the USG to intervene, arguing there had been &enough disregard for Palestinian blood.8 PA Foreign Minister Nabil Sha,ath said &there is no struggle between Fatah and Hamas. Shaykh Ahmad Yasin is respected by every Fatah member...." All three statements referred to the Yasin assassination as crossing &all red lines.8

Inside Hamas

17. (C) Among Gaza contacts, Abd al-Aziz Rantisi is viewed as a possible interim leader of Hamas, at least in the short term. According to Hamas-affiliated journalist Ghazi Hamad, the organization will convene a consultative council in the coming weeks to choose a new permanent leader. He opined, however, that in the nearer term, the focus will remain on immediate retaliation for Yasin's death, a position borne out by statements from Hamas and other militant leaders (Jerusalem septel). Ha'aretz columnist and Palestinian-watcher Danny Rubenstein opined that Yasin's death would increase support for Hamas among Palestinians. Furthermore, with Yasin's death, the possibility that the PA would ever try to rein in Hamas was gone as any efforts to this end would be viewed as collaboration with Israeli security forces.

Israeli Reaction

18. (C) In meetings March 22 with DOD Under Secretary Dov Zakheim, Minister of Defense Shaul Mofaz said that Israel had "done the right thing," and would "continue to fight terror." He referred to Shaykh Yasin as "the Palestinians' bin Laden." Deputy PM Ehud Olmert, however, noted to Zakheim in a separate meeting that Yasin's killing could make it more difficult to carry out the coordination with the PA necessary ahead of the planned withdrawal. Opposition MK Efraim Sneh had a different take, telling Zakheim that Yasin's assassination was "not a clever move", because it will accelerate the ongoing power shift in Gaza further in favor of Hamas and away from the PA now that people have more sympathy for Hamas. Sneh further claimed that the Sharon government was "doing nothing" to encourage moderate Palestinians to take over in Gaza and opined that, had the GOI done more to bolster Abu Mazen, there could have been a "sea change" in Gaza for the better.

19. (SBU) Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu (Likud) said in an interview with Israel Radio March 22 that the IDF action would make it clear that there is "no immunity for terror." While acknowledging that there could be an upsurge in terrorism in response, Netanyahu stressed that in the long term, the effect would be to rein in Hamas. Minister of Agriculture, and fellow Likud member, Yisrael Katz said that the IDF action rehabilitated Israel's deterrent capability. NRP MK Gila Finkelstein agreed that Yasin had been a "marked man," but only regretted that his elimination had to be linked with the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

110. (SBU) However, support was not universal within the GOI. Minister of Interior Avraham Poraz (Shinui) said in an interview with Israeli media March 22 that he had opposed the cabinet decision to target Hamas leaders because such action was likely to increase terrorism inside Israel, a view also held by Yossi Beilin, head of the newly formed Yachad Party and architect of the Geneva Accords. Calling the policy of targeted killings "neither legitimate nor effective," Beilin asserted that the policy has not eliminated terrorism but has instead cost hundreds of lives. Meretz MK Yossi Sarid agreed, saying that killing Yasin would only escalate the violence. Israeli Arab MK Ahmad Tibi called Yasin's killing "madness", while Hadash MK Mohammad Barakeh said in a statement to the press that the GOI had turned into "a wild gang which is exposing Israel to frightening terrorism."

Attack Prompts Clashes in the WB, East Jerusalem and in Gaza

111. (SBU) Hours after the assassination, Israeli troops killed one Palestinian and injured seven others during clashes in the Balata refugee camp. A Palestinian journalist covering the clashes was also killed. Near Rachel's Tomb in

Bethlehem, three Palestinians were injured, one of them seriously, when the IDF fired on protesters who reportedly threw Molotov cocktails at the troops. At least 14 Palestinians were injured in clashes with the IDF in Halhul and Hebron, and several shooting attacks at IDF targets were reported in Hebron, Nablus, and near Bethlehem. Clashes also broke out between Palestinians and Israeli police near Damascus Gate and the Mount of Olives in East Jerusalem. Inside the Old City of Jerusalem, a group of Palestinians attacked an Israeli youth; three of the attackers were arrested. No injuries were reported in any of the Jerusalem events.

12. (SBU) All schools were closed in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem after the assassination, in accordance with the three-day mourning period announced by Arafat. Roughly 3,500 Palestinians gathered in Nablus and about 1,000 Palestinians assembled in central Ramallah to protest the assassination. Hundreds of Palestinians demonstrated in Tulkarem and Qalqilya. Several wake houses were opened throughout the West Bank and Gaza to mourn Yasin, with Arafat announcing that he would receive condolences in his office from 1800-2000 hours.

13. (SBU) During clashes with the IDF in Khan Yunis, two Palestinians were killed and five others were wounded, and four Palestinians were injured in similar clashes in Abu Khouli. Palestinians also fired anti-tank missiles and mortars on settlements in Gush Katif, and a missile was fired at the Erez Crossing. No injuries were reported in either incident. In Rafah, some 25,000 people demonstrated on the main street, as Hamas leaders there called for a "military show of strength."

Hamas Points a Finger At U.S.

14. (SBU) In a statement March 22 and posted on the AFP website, the al-Qassam Brigades blamed the USG for Yasin,s assassination, saying &The Zionists did not take such a step without the approval of the terrorist US Administration. Therefore, it should bear responsibility for this crime.8 Hamas leader Abd al-Aziz Rantisi added that &the Islamic nation should wake up and shake the land under the feet of those Zionists and those who back them from the Americans.8 Islamic Jihad leader Ramadan Shallah referred repeatedly to the &U.S. missiles8 used in the attack.

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